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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT—III

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL H. H. SARGENT, U. S. ARMY RETIRED

GERMANY'S THIRD GREAT MISTAKE

Since the great attempt to break through the Western front at Verdun had utterly failed and Germany saw there was no longer any hope of doing it and resuming a war of movement, she again reverted to her former plan to hold it defensively with a sufficient force to prevent the Allies from breaking through, and with her available forces took the offensive successfully against Russia, Roumania, Italy, and again against Russia; and, largely as a result of carrying out this plan, was wholly or partly successful against each. Had she continued in this way to mass her forces in turn against the Allied armies at Salonika and in Italy, she would most probably, with considerably less effort than she later spent in attempting to break through on the Western front, have conquered or annihilated or captured both.

With the Salonika army defeated, the German and Austrian armies could have quickly overrun and occupied Greece; and with the Italian army defeated, they could have occupied the valley of the Po, rich in agriculture and manufacturing, and have pushed forward to the French and Maritime Alps; and might have been able to break through the Maritime Alps and invade France via Nice. And even had Germany been stopped there, she could easily have held temporarily the line of the French Alps, and thence southward to the sea, as well as the line of the Western front, while she was organizing and bringing into her system all the conquered countries. Master of Italy, Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Roumania, Bulgaria, Austria, Russia, and the greater part of Turkey, her dominion would have been

mightier than was that of Napoleon at the height of his power.

Having reached such success as here set forth, she would have been in a position to forestall the landing of any expedition in the Balkans from the Aegean Sea, in Austria from the Adriatic, or in Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean; or, had it been landed, would have been favorably situated militarily for concentrating a greatly superior force against it; and destroying it before it could have gained a foothold and advanced into the interior.

For some reason Germany did not continue to carry out this plan; but decided to renew the offensive on the Western front; and with this end in view began on March 21, 1918, a little more than two years from the time of beginning the attack on Verdun, a powerful attack against the Allied line opposite Amiens, and then followed it up by a like attack against the British line in the vicinity of Ypres, and two other similar attacks against the French line between Reims and Montdidier, towards Chateau-Thierry. By massing overwhelming forces against sectors of the line in these attacks, Germany succeeded in pushing it back thirty-five miles opposite Amiens, thirty miles to Chateau-Thierry, and about ten miles in the vicinity of Ypres; but in no case was she able to break completely through the line and resume a war of movement.

Just why Germany made such a complete and momentous change in her whole strategical plan¹ in March, 1918, is not now fully known; but the principal reasons for the change are probably as follows:

First: Because she felt that she must make a supreme effort for victory on the Western front before the American troops arrived there in large numbers.

Second: Because the German commanders, having discovered that the British had built very few if any lines of entrenchments behind certain sectors of their line, and had very few reserves behind them, hoped by attacking these weak sectors with greatly superior forces, which had become available as a result of the collapse and disintegration of the Russian armies, to be able to break through them and resume a war of movement.

Third: Because the military authorities, by a study of

¹ There was a persistent rumor at the time that Hindenburg was opposed to this change of plan which the German General Staff approved.

General von Hutier's plan of attacking, based upon his experience in the capture of Riga, and their easy success in driving back the British troops after the British victory at Cambrai, had become convinced that the best way to break through an entrenched line was not to pound themselves forward by a succession of small attacks, as they had attempted to do at Verdun, and as the British had done at the Somme, but to assemble their divisions in overwhelming force against a long sector of the enemy's line and gathering up all their implements and methods of destruction, to move forward on an extended front and strike it with their utmost power.

Since the strategical situation on the Western front during this time had not changed, the question arises: Why did not Germany make the second effort to break the Allied front along the Verdun-Reims sector, instead of making it along the Somme sector from La Fere to Arras? The answer is, that although strategically the Verdun-Reims sector was the better place to break through, tactically it was the more difficult. Bitter experience had already taught Germany that it would be impossible to break through this sector of the line. Then, again, Germany must have known that a large portion of the French reserves were at this time in Champagne south of Reims and that very few, if any, were in rear of the Somme sector. And she doubtless knew, too, that the British had constructed few, if any, lines of intrenchments behind this sector after the battle of the Somme; and that she had taken over only recently that portion of the sector south of St. Quentin; and, as yet, had not had time to make complete arrangements for holding it. Then, too, the Germans knew that the dividing line separating the French from the British armies crossed this sector at its southern end; and that there was as yet no commander in chief of the Allied armies on the Western front, each army having thus far in the war acted to a great extent independently; which facts could not but be bound to prevent that full unity of command between them, so essential to success. All of which no doubt led the Germans to choose this sector for their great attack.

Their plan evidently was to throw an enormous force against this fifty miles of British front and to open a gap between the British and French armies, forcing, if possible, the British back on the English Channel and the French

back upon Paris; then to contain one while they settled with the other.

As to whether, if successful, they would have first proceeded against the British and attempted to throw them back on the Channel ports and captured them; or against the French and attempted to envelop, defeat, and capture them and the French capital, is not now known; and, perhaps, was not known by them at the time; for they may have intended awaiting future developments before making a decision.

But it may be remarked here that it probably would have been better for the Germans to settle with the British first; since to proceed against the French about Paris while this large British army was in their rear and threatening their lines of communication back through France and Belgium would have been highly dangerous.

Although the great attack begun by the Germans on March 21, 1918, failed to separate the British from the French armies, it forced the Allied line back a distance of about thirty-five miles, producing an immense salient opposite Amiens whose base was about fifty miles in extent; and it had the immediate effect also of changing the slightly curved front between Verdun and the English Channel into an angular front which extended from Verdun in a generally western direction past Noyon to a point about one mile south of Montdidier and thence in a generally northern direction to Nieuport on the English Channel. This change from a curved to an angular front, as well as the creation of the salient opposite Amiens, not only made a vast difference in the strategical situation of the combatant armies, but it had the immediate effect of bringing about greater unity of action between the Allies, by causing them to select General Ferdinand Foch as Commander-in-Chief. It is purposed to discuss in this and an article in the next issue of *THE REVIEW*, each of these changes under the headings: An Angular Front; A Salient; and Unity of Command.

AN ANGULAR FRONT

Occupying that portion of the theater of war within the angular front, the Germans had the advantage of interior lines, which enabled them to mass a superior force upon either the western or southern portion of their front much

more quickly and easily than could the Allies on the outside of the angular front assemble a sufficient force to meet it.

But, on the other hand, this angular front gave to the Allies a great strategical advantage, in that, if they should break through on either front it would so threaten the communications of the Germans attacking on the other as to compel them to turn back to save their communications. In other words, it gave the Allies the opportunity of carrying out that great principle of strategy of striking at their adversary's communications without exposing their own; for it mattered not whether they should strike northward from the Reims-Verdun front toward Mezieres and Sedan or eastward from the Amiens-Arras-Lens front toward Hirsion and Maubeuge, in either case they would sever a considerable number of the German lines of communication and threaten seriously the remainder without in the least exposing their own to a German attack.

And this advantage which the Allies possessed, had they had the strength or genius to make use of it, far surpassed the advantage which the Germans possessed as a result of their central position and interior lines. And the reason for this is that an attack made directly through the lines upon the German communications would not only have effectually put a stop at once to their advance, but would have placed them in a most precarious situation and compelled them to turn back to fight for the recovery of their lost or threatened communications.

To illustrate: Suppose that at the time the Germans began their great attack of March 21, or a day or two afterwards, the French with their reserves massed in Champagne had been prepared to make a great attack northward from the Reims-Verdun front and had broken through a considerable distance, very much as the Germans broke through in their great push toward Amiens, and had cut the east and west railways south of the Ardennes Mountains, what would have been the result? The answer is, that the Germans would have been compelled to stop their advance, turn back, and either fight to recover the lost railways or try to escape from the pocket in which this maneuver had placed them, by retreating northeastward and gaining the Charleroi-Namur-Liege-Aix-la-Chapelle railway.

If to this the reply be made that the Argonne forest,

just north of the Reims-Verdun front, was such a difficult country to operate in, and so strongly fortified and held, that little headway could have been made through it, the answer is that the Americans afterwards forced themselves through it in the face of a most desperate resistance; and that a powerful attack on this vital part of the angular front, even if it had not made much headway, would nevertheless have compelled the Germans to halt their leading divisions and send back many of them to stop the French advance, just as a few months later they were forced to send them back to try to stop the onrush of the American soldiers.

The maxim or principle of war which applies in these cases is, that where two armies are maneuvering against each other's communications, or are attacking each other, that army whose communications are the more seriously threatened will invariably abandon any effort to press on and will fall back to fight for its communications. And "The importance of this fact," says Hamley, "is immense; for the commander who finds himself on his enemy's rear, while his own is still beyond his adversary's reach, may cast aside all anxiety for his own communications, and call up every detachment to the decisive point, certain that the enemy will abandon his own designs in order, if possible, to retrieve his position."¹

There are, it is believed, no exceptions in history to this maxim, save in a few cases where the commanding general had decided to give up his communications because he had established, or planned to establish, new ones; as Napoleon did at Austerlitz,² where he made no effort to fight to preserve his threatened communications back southward through Vienna, because he had already prepared new ones westward through Bohemia, which he could have used in case of defeat; or as Sherman did in the Atlanta campaign, where he made no effort to fight for his communications back to Chattanooga, upon Hood's marching rearward from Sherman's front to cut them, because he had decided to cut loose from them and march to the sea, where he would establish, and did establish, a new base for future operations.

It would appear that had the Allies been in a condition to strike at the communications of the Germans by breaking through the line on one side or the other of the angular

¹ Hamley, *Operations of War*, p. 93.

² Sargent, *Napoleon Bonaparte's First Campaign*, pp. 186 and 187.

front, there was offered them strategically a most favorable opportunity for its success, since the Germans in their great attacks invariably selected the front behind which there were few Allied reserves for massing their own reserves preparatory to making the attempt to break through, thus necessarily weakening proportionately their own front behind which the Allied reserves were massed, and thereby making it the very front on which an Allied offensive would most probably succeed.

But, as a matter of fact, nothing of this kind was attempted. On the contrary, when the Germans made their attack on March 21, 1918, the Allied reserves in Champagne, and such other reserves as could be collected, were hurried around the angular front with all possible speed to stop the German advance on Amiens; then when the Germans made their second great attack south of Ypres on April 9, the reserves were hurried northward to that point to help save the British, who in a critical situation with "their backs to the wall" were fighting desperately to keep themselves from being driven into the sea; then when the Germans made their third great attack on May 27, upon Chateau-Thierry, and for the second time in the war reached the Marne, the reserves were hurriedly sent to that front to check the Germans and keep them from cutting off the French right wing and from finally reaching Paris.

Why were all the Allied efforts to stop the Germans during these four months, from March 21 until July 18 when Foch began his great offensive, confined entirely to defensive operations? Until fuller details of the situation become known this question cannot be satisfactorily answered; but probably the failure of the Allies to appoint a commander-in-chief prior to the great German offensive of March 21 had much to do with it; for it must be remembered that it takes time to prepare for an offensive, and that "the transition from the defensive to the offensive is," according to Napoleon, "one of the most delicate operations of war." Of course the aim of the Allies during these four critical months was to hold the Germans until America could transport sufficient men to France to give the Allies a preponderance of fighting troops. But whether this purely defensive strategy, which seems to have been the Allied plan up to the counter-attack begun by General Foch on

¹ General Bournod, *Napoleon's Maxims of War*, p. 50.

July 18, was as effective in gaining the result sought as defensive-offensive strategy would have been is questionable.

As to waiting for prepondering forces before beginning an offensive, there is this to be said in its favor: since the Americans were sending to France on an average of more than 200,000 soldiers a month the Allies would soon considerably outnumber the Germans. But did this justify their waiting during these critical months for preponderating forces? Perhaps so! At any rate, it succeeded. Nevertheless, it is well to remember that great soldiers have seldom deemed it necessary, even in critical times, to wait for preponderating forces before undertaking offensive operations; and that, not infrequently, such operations have led to the greatest victories. A vastly preponderating force against Robert E. Lee did not prevent him and his great lieutenant, "Stonewall" Jackson, from winning the battle of Chancellorsville; nor did it prevent Bonaparte in his first Italian campaign, although greatly outnumbered at all times in the theater of war, from bringing a superior force upon practically every battlefield; and by so doing defeating and crushing one Sardinian and six Austrian armies sent successively against him.¹

But until the facts are more fully known it is not safe to pronounce definite criticism on any of the operations of the Allies during these four critical months. Nevertheless, from what is known, and judging from the strategical ability shown by Marshal Foch in his subsequent operations on the Western front as commander-in-chief, we are of the opinion that, had he been appointed commander-in-chief of the Allied armies a sufficient time prior to the great thrust toward Amiens, begun on March 21, 1918, to have formulated and worked out his plans for meeting the attacks, he would have put a stop to them much earlier than he did.

(To be continued.)

¹ Sargent, *Napoleon Bonaparte's First Campaign*, pp. 168 and 169.